AN

ORATION

ON THE

UTILITY

OF

LITERARY ESTABLISHMENTS,

DELIVERED

(At the request of the Proprietors)

AT THE OPENING OF THE LITERARY ROOMS
IN NEW-YORK,

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BY JOHN BRISTED, ESQ.

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AN ORATION

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GENTLEMEN,

IT is with the sincerest emotions of pleasure, that I now congratulate you upon the first opening in this city of an institution dedicated altogether to the promotion of the best interests of literature: and, alike impelled by the calls of personal friendship, and by an unfeigned attachment to the cause of letters, I now presume to request your patient attention for a few moments, to some brief and summary remarks upon the general utility of Literary Establishments.

To every man of ordinary reflection it must be manifest, that the chief causes of the difference which distinguishes the character of the roving barbarian from that of the child of civilization, spring from the cultivation of letters in the one, and the entire unacquaintance in the other even with the sources of elementary instruction.

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All those who have ploughed beneath the surface of the first rudiments of the philosophy of the human mind, know full well, that, other things being equal, —that is to say, where equality of native talent, and a concurrence of similar circumstances conspire to lend their aid,—the power of forming new intellectual combinations, of giving birth to bold and daring conceptions, of displaying all the originality of inventive genius, is precisely proportioned to the extent of information. For, as genius itself can do no more, than, by the process of reflection, form general combinations of those primitive materials of thought, which are alike open to the acquisition of all, who will search for ideas by a vigilant observation of external objects, and by a diligent perusal of books; it follows, of necessity, that in proportion to the quantity of images laid up in the store-house of the brain, will be the power of creating mental associations, numerous, novel, diversified, and extensive.

The history of the whole human race, bears the most decisive testimony to the unerring truth of this universal proposition. The ideas of the unlettered savage, and of the uneducated peasant, are few and simple, their knowledge is scanty and confined; and, in consequence, their original conceptions, their

combinations of images are narrow, scarce, weak, vague, and undefined.

Cast your eye over the whole map of the intellectual world, carry your mind back to those ages which have long been mingled with the years that are beyond the flood, and you will find, that, while the unnumbered millions of Asia, of Africa, and all of Europe, excepting one little nook and corner called Ancient Greece, were grovelling through successive centuries, in the midnight of intellectual darkness, sunk in sensual sloth, or roused to exertion only by the call of animal appetite; the few thousands, that inhabited one little solitary city of Ancient Greece, blazed forth into a flame of excited genius, in the persons, and in the productions of poets, historians, orators, philosophers, and artists, that even at this moment lights the footsteps of aspiring intellect to the paths of fame; and will continue to shine with renewed and increasing lustre, throughout all the ages of the future generations of men, down to the last syllable of recorded time.

When the sceptre of national sovereignty had departed from Greece for ever, the literature of vanquished Greece, blending with that of victorious Rome, diffused for a while the light of cultivated

genius over the greater portion of the then discovered globe.

When all taste for letters was extinguished, and the whole Roman empire presented only one entire mass of abject vice, the curtains of ignorance were drawn all around the Eastern and the Western world; and the children of men slumbered upon the confines of intellectual death, through the long series of a thousand years.

At length, upon the borders of the yet unsubdued dominion of the night, began to break the twilight and the day of hope;—the revival of letters dawned the presage of a brighter hour to Europe, than had ever yet shone upon her offspring, in their happiest efforts of enthusiastic inspiration. And, now, while the illimitable regions of Asia and of Africa, continental and insular, still remain benighted in the shades of impenetrable ignorance, Europe is rapidly extending her conquests on all sides, into the dominions of art and science; and, rich with the spoils of time, is continually unrolling the page of knowledge, to increase the comforts, to enlarge the understanding, to exalt the genius, to emblazon the existence of civilized society. Greece, and Rome, and the more polished nations of modern Europe, have all

owed their immeasurable superiority over their contemporaries in the other portions of the globe, to their own ardent and unremitted cultivation of literature, in all its departments, throughout the various range of human inquiry.

Amidst the incessant revolutions of this sublunary world, sprang up these United States. The legitimate offspring of the most enlightened nation in the elder world, born in the most illumined period of that enlightened nation, free as the air that they inhale upon their hills, conjoining all the mind of Europe with the efforts of their own native genius, fostered in the sunshine of advantages peculiar to themselves, these United States present a splendid, a stupendous contrast to the aboriginal barbarians, when first discovered, after innumerable ages of their unexplored barbarism had elapsed; a stupendous, a splendid contrast to the savage Indians who now prowl around our frontiers, or who roam through the trackless forest in quest of a precarious subsistence.

Is it necessary to ask, at this advanced stage of the world, at this late hour of human existence, with all the experience of preceding ages to guide our steps, if these United States, will, by scattering their

diverging solitary fires, shoot momentary gleams of trembling light, and then expire in oblivious darkness for ever: or, if they will, by diffusing concentrated light from their united orbs, become permanent lords of the intellectual ascendant, and culminate from the Equator?

What are the best appointed human means by which the national intellect can be trained to the readiest acquisition of individual improvement, of social benefit, of public renown? The obvious, the unavoidable answer is, by encouraging those Literary Establishments, which afford the means of various and extensive information, which gather together individuals of every cast of character, of every order of native talent, of every degree of acquired knowledge: and by giving them continual opportunities of sharpening, quickening, strengthening, extending, and elevating their minds by mutual inquiry, and reciprocal collision, pour out a perpetual stream of the life's-blood of intellect into all the veins and arteries of the body-politic.

The Portico and the Lyceum at Athens, the schools of philosophy at Rome, the National Institutions and the Royal Societies of France and England, have all most emphatically contributed to quicken the progress, to invigorate the growth, to

chasten the ornament, to lop the luxuriance, to concentrate the strength of Literature, in their respective countries.

And shall not these United States, with the best blood of Europe flowing along all their veins, with the best lights of Europe to direct their steps, with native advantages unparalleled in the history of Man, with an almost universal diffusion of elementary intelligence, with individual liberty, with frequent gleams of national greatness flashing thick and strong over all the political horizon, with every possible incitement to intellectual improvement; shall not they spring forward to avail themselves of the benefit of those *Literary Establishments* which might gather together the various single rays of solitary intellect, and point them all into one bright blaze of mutual concentration?

The thoughts of individual man, while unagitated with the hope of applause, while undisturbed by the dread of censure, while alone and without collision, are apt to stagnate in the cells of his sluggish brain, to be dim and shadowy in their outline, to be confused and weak in their subordinate details; until roused into animated exertion by amicable conflict with his fellows, he soon discovers, that his percep-

tion is sharpened, his power of association strengthened, his memory quickened, his judgment exercised and invigorated, his faculty of reasoning deepened and enlarged, and all the fires of his imagination fanned into a brighter flame.

"For know, that man, how dearly ever parted,
How much in having, or without, or in,
Cannot make boast to have that which he hath,
Nor feels not what he owes, but by *reflection*;
As when his virtues, shining upon others,
Heat them, and they retort that heat again
To the first giver.
For no man is the lord of any thing,
(Though in him and of him there be much consisting,)
Till he communicate his parts to others:
Nor doth he of himself know them for aught,
Till he behold them form'd in the applause,
Where they are extended; which, like an arch, reverberates
The voice again; or, like a gate of steel,
Fronting the sun, receives, and renders back
His figure, and his heat."

Do I ask the question, as if in doubt, whether or not these United States will rear within themselves Literary Establishments similar to those which have fostered the genius of the elder world? Every thing

around, and about us, gives the most decided affirmative answer to this question. This day, this hour, these *Literary Rooms*, all conspire to testify, that the wealth and mind of New-York, of the first city in the first state of our mighty union, have laid the foundations of this institution, for the improvement of public talent, for the embellishment of social existence.

These *Literary Rooms* will afford the means of instruction and delight to all the various classes and orders of the intellectual community.

Here, the Theologian will find those lights by which he can trace the effects produced upon the heart and conduct of individual man, and upon the national destinies of entire communities, by the influences of religion, of superstition, of infidelity. Here, he may mark the progress of those stupendous efforts, which all christendom, in harmonious combination, is now making to spread the light of christianity over the whole face of the habitable globe; over the *thousand millions* of people that now tread the surface of the earth; scarcely *one fifth* of whom even nominally profess the religion of Jesus Christ. *Eight hundred millions* of human beings, at this moment, are either lost in the darkness of pagan idola-

try, or degraded by the bloody brutality of Moslem fanaticism, or hardened into incarnate fiends by the absolute rejection of all religious belief.

Here, the Statesman may examine those primary principles of political economy, by the wise and virtuous application of which to the ever-fluctuating course of human affairs, nations may be gradually built up into permanent and extensive greatness; may become prosperous and beloved at home, honored, and revered abroad. Here, he may trace each separate link of that great chain of international law, which binds together the different sovereignties of the world in one vast compacted bond of mutual order and reciprocal justice. Here, he may mark the rise and progress of that mighty instrument of civilization, the *balancing system*, by which the stronger states are taught to protect the weak, the weak to confederate together for mutual defence, and all independent potentates to unite in offensive and defensive league, against a common enemy, for the common safety of all, for the preservation of national existence, and individual freedom. Here, he may track the footsteps of those terrible events which are now shaking the earth to its deepest base, and giving a new form and pressure to the

destinies of all people, commonwealths, empires, and kingdoms, from one extremity to the other of creation's remotest bounds.

Here, the Lawyer may find access to those sources of various and general information, without the knowledge of which, no man, how highly soever endowed with the choicest gifts of native genius, can possibly become a profound and comprehensive jurist; can travel up to the well springs and fountains of jurisprudence, can discover the origin of laws in the habits and manners, the spirit and character, the social institutions, the political exigencies of a country; can explain the legal code by the light of contemporaneous history—and illustrate history by the exposition of contemporaneous law.

Here, the Physician may explore the rudiments of his interesting and important science, may alike survey the discoveries of preceding ages, and note the continual accumulation of progressive improvements in the healing art, which all the sister sciences contribute their aid to form, under the auspices of an innumerable phalanx of well-disciplined genius in every quarter of the globe. Here, he may learn the effects of the various physical agents upon disease; and above all, may study the influence which

intellectual and moral impulses never fail to exercise upon the human frame.

Here, the Man of business may, during the occasional intervals of relaxation from his more active pursuits, find recreation and improvement from tasting the streams of daily and hourly knowledge that flow around him, may at once lull to rest all care and agitation, and enlarge the boundaries of his understanding, by an habitual acquaintance with the passing occurrences of human society, native and foreign; by a familiar inspection of the positions and localities of the different countries of the earth; by an interchange of opinion and thought with men, who, like himself, seek to combine the prompt and vigorous efficiency of practical wisdom, with the more abstracted acquisitions drawn from a diligent perusal of the lucubrations of the closet.

Here, the Man of leisure may most profitably spend his hours in ranging at large amidst the immortal productions of Art and Science. Here he may learn to quicken his powers of external observation, to turn all his reading into mental nourishment by the digesting process of reflection; and to rise in the dignity of thinking beings by causing the past and the future to predominate over the present,

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by enabling the pleasures of the imagination to triumph over the mere perceptions of sense.

Here, the general Scholar may give full scope to his excursive powers; here, he may fathom the recondite depths of science, nourish the enthusiasm of his genius amidst the splendors of erudition, adorn all that he touches with the refinement of exquisite taste, exercise all his faculties to select with skill, to arrange with judgment, to communicate with a full flow of ready and impressive eloquence, all the vast and various treasures of his extensive information.

Then, let the general scholar, the man of leisure, the man of business, the physician, the lawyer, the statesman, and the divine, all unite their powerful efforts to continue and to augment the most efficient patronage and protection to this infant Establishment; so that, under their guardian auspices, it may long flourish, as the general repository of letters; to which the inhabitants of every age and condition, in this great and opulent city, might constantly resort for pleasure and improvement; to which strangers, from our own States and from foreign countries, might occasionally repair for rational recreation, during their visits of curiosity or of business to the metropolis of America.

And, may the example now set by this Literary Institution of New-York be speedily followed by all the other chief towns and cities throughout the union, and render these United States at once the bulwark and ornament of Literature within their own extensive dominions, and the permanent object of respect and admiration to the whole surrounding world!

Then,—quite releas'd from all the vulgar throng,
So vain of dulness, and so pleas'd with wrong;
Who hourly teach her, like themselves, to hide
Folly in froth, and barrenness in pride,—
Great shall Columbia rise;—and wreath the charms
Of soft refinement round the pomp of arms;
Her bards aspiring flash their fires of song
To light her warriors' thunderbolts along:
Her artists learn most thoroughly to scan
The mind arrayed in lineaments of man;
With daring pencil to portray the form
Of heroes riding on the battle-storm:
On the bright canvass teach the eye to roll
The expressive movements of a mighty soul:
Bid art to rival nature's plastic power,
Nay,—be the ascendant for her glowing hour;
Unite the poet's with the painter's fire;
And all the prostrate world, in gazing, shall admire.

FINIS.

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